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SUBJECT: MFA ON INTRA-ASEAN RELATIONS, IMPORTANCE OF US ROLE

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: MFA Permanent Secretary Virasakdi Futrukul met with DOD A/S James Shinn and DAS James Clad on April 22. He encouraged the US to strengthen its engagement in the region, suggesting the establishment of a regular US-ASEAN Defense Ministers meeting, and increased joint training for humanitarian disasters as two ideas to consider. Virasakdi said that relations with Malaysia had improved, which helped Thailand deal with its ethnic Malay insurgency in the South. Virasakdi said that Thai PM had talked to Burmese junta leader Than Shwe about Thailand's transition to democracy, but Virasakdi believed the Burmese were more interested in imitating Suharto-era Indonesia. As ASEAN chair, Thailand is likely to support and encourage greater US engagement in the region. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) MFA Permanent Secretary Virasakdi Futrukul discussed Thailand's plans as ASEAN chair during a meeting with DOD A/S James Shinn and DAS Clad on April 22. Permsec Virasakdi said that Thailand and other countries in the grouping wanted to focus on making ASEAN better known among the people in the member countries themselves, and Thailand would try to emphasize the theme of a "people-based" ASEAN. Thailand is also considering the theme for the East Asia Summit meeting this year. Last year, Singapore as ASEAN chair had chosen climate change as their focus. Thailand would likely focus on "human security," including both financial security and food security as topics for consideration.

SUPPORT FOR US ENGAGEMENT

¶3. (C) Virasakdi showed a strong interest in keeping the US closely engaged in the region. He welcomed the expected visit of Defense Secretary Gates to Thailand on June 1, saying that this would help to assure the other ASEAN countries of continuing US interest. "All of us are concerned about China," Virasakdi said, and are eager to see a US role as a counterbalance. ASEAN was formed, he said, to prevent the countries of Southeast Asia from being squeezed between China and India. He pointed out that China had devoted significant energy to its relationship with ASEAN. Every year, China had rolled out a new initiative, such as acceding to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, or setting up an periodic consultation with the ASEAN Defense Ministers. Virasakdi noted that other ASEAN partner countries had acceded to the TAC or were in the process of doing so, except for the US. He suggested that the US consider a US-ASEAN defense ministers meeting -- perhaps not as an annual event, but on some regular basis. He agreed that such a meeting could perhaps take place as a stand-alone event with

"regional" defense ministers, rather than as a formal ASEAN event, in order to finesse the problem of Burmese participation. DASD Clad noted that dealing with the question of Burma's participation in such a meeting would be an issue, but that the suggestion merited consideration.

¶ 14. (C) A/S Shinn noted that, even as ASEAN integration deepened, most defense relationships were still bilateral. He asked what the next level of "ASEAN-level engagement" might be. Virasakdi suggested working on humanitarian cooperation, holding up the relief efforts in the wake of the 2004 tsunami as an example. MFA Americas DG Nongnuth also raised the possibility of cooperation on security in the Straits of Malacca. In response to a question, Virasakdi noted that, if the US decided it would like to join the East Asia Summit, then Thailand would be ready to discuss ways to help.

BURMA

¶ 15. (C) The Permsec provided further reporting on Prime Minister Samak's visit to Burma last month. He said that the PM had spent most of his private meeting with Burmese leader Than Shwe describing Thailand's democratic development. (Virasakdi noted that the 72-year-old Samak had been personally involved in much of that history.) Than Shwe had responded by describing the plans for the referendum and the election. Virasakdi believed that the generals "had learned from the last election" and were prepared for the upcoming polls. He thought they were following the model of Indonesia under Suharto, and planned to turn their USDA mass movement into a political party, like Golkar. In any case, he said,

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the constitution would give the military guaranteed seats in the Parliament, and the military leader the right to declare a state of emergency at any time and seize control of power -- so there would be no need for a coup.

¶ 16. (C) In Virasakdi's view, Burma does not want to be exclusively dependent on China. He pointed to the recent visit of junta number 2 Maung Aye to India, where the two countries signed a deal for the development of a port. He said the US should encourage India to get more engaged with Burma, as a counterbalance to China. DASD Clad pointed out, however, that US policy is in fact to discourage this kind of engagement. He also noted that India is not satisfied with its relationship with Burma. Virasakdi praised the role of Indonesia, which sees itself as a possible model for Burma's transition. Thailand is likely to support Indonesian initiatives to find a regional solution for the Burma problem. "Why not?" he said, "The Gambari process doesn't seem to be going anywhere." Virasakdi thought it would be useful to "bring out" junta leaders and "let them see some alternatives."

MALAYSIA AND THE SOUTH

¶ 17. (C) Discussing other countries in the region, Virasakdi said that the relationship with Malaysia had greatly improved after the difficulties in 2005-2006, provoked by Malaysia's concerns over the treatment of ethnic Malays in Thailand's troubled southern provinces. Coup-installed PM Surayud had worked very effectively to repair the damage, and Malaysia and Thailand now enjoyed good cooperation. Virasakdi felt that Malaysia "controlled" the old insurgent leaders who were part of PULO, but that PULO had no control over the BRN-C, which was carrying out the actual attacks. BRN-C, in turn, did not trust Malaysia. Thailand's strategy was to trumpet its good relationship with Malaysia, and thus deepen the BRN-C's distrust, so the insurgents would be reluctant to use Malaysian soil as a safe haven. Virasakdi acknowledged that this was a difficult issue for Malaysia, given the sympathy many Malaysians had for the ethnic Malays in southern

Thailand. Virasakdi was concerned, however, that the new Thai government might not maintain these good relations with Malaysia, as some Thai officials are suspicious of their neighbor. Virasakdi hoped that PM Samak's April 23/24 visit to Malaysia would help to overcome that suspicion and keep the relationship on an even keel.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Virasakdi's points covered little new ground, particularly on Burma, but we appreciated his frank assessment of the value of increased US engagement in the region. During Thailand's chairmanship of ASEAN, we will have a well-positioned ally who welcomes a continued strong US role in Asia.

¶9. (U) A/S Shinn cleared this cable.

JOHN